

# HEROES OF THE DESERT

## Dying to Self, Living for God

### Saint Mary of Egypt

- her *Life* is written by Saint Sophronius, based on oral accounts
- originally told by Abba Zosimas
  - a monk in Palestine (probably near Caesarea) since childhood
  - around age 53, tempted to think there was no one better than himself
  - instructed by God to go to a monastery near the Jordan
    - lives as the lowest member of the community
    - amazed by the holiness of everyone there
- on the First Sunday of Lent, the monks went into the desert for solitude
  - walks farther and farther, drawn by a desire to find a spiritual father
  - hurries along as if he is “travelling to a well-known inn”
  - on the 21st day, stops at noon to pray
    - he sees a shadow over his shoulder
    - turns out to be an old woman, completely naked and worn out by penance
    - she flees from him; he pursues her and gives her his cloak
  - she knows his name, and that he is a priest
    - Zosimas presumes she must have spent her whole life in asceticism
    - she insists that she is just an ordinary sinner, totally dependent on God
    - he prevails on her to tell him her story
- Mary of Egypt
  - was born in Alexandria and baptized as a child
  - at the age of 12 she left home
    - lost her virginity at a young age, and gave herself over to lust
    - lived in terrible poverty, giving herself to one man after another
  - she sees a large group of people heading for the port
    - asks one of the travelers what is happening
      - they are going to Jerusalem to see the Holy Cross
      - he tells her that anyone may go who can pay the fare
    - she meets a number of young men and flirts with them to get on board
    - seduces crew and passengers alike to “pay” for her passage and food
  - in Jerusalem she continues her life of dissipation
- The Exaltation of the Cross
  - one day she sees a large crowd headed for the Church of the Holy Sepulcher
    - she follows along out of curiosity
    - finds that she cannot enter the church

- an invisible force repels her at the threshold
    - begins to realize that it is because of her sinful life
  - she sees an icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the wall and begins to pray
    - “It is not suitable for me, defiled as I am, to look upon this picture of you.”
    - “It would be right for you in your purity to reject and loathe my impurity.”
    - “But God became man to save sinners and to call them to repentance.”
    - “So help me, for I am alone and without any other help.”
    - “When I see the cross of your Son, I will go wherever you shall lead”
  - is able to enter, and sees the exaltation of the Cross
    - she is converted and leaves the church with joy
    - hears a voice saying, “If you cross the Jordan you will find peace.”
      - travels to the Church of St John the Baptist and goes to Mass
      - the next day she crosses the Jordan and goes into the desert
- Mary lives in the desert for 46 years
  - the first 17 years are hard penance, to make up for 17 years of dissipation
  - only took 2 ½ loaves of bread; when they run out she lives on herbs and grasses
  - often tempted by memories of former life: turns to the Blessed Mother for help
- She asks Zosimas to return the following Holy Thursday with the Eucharist
  - he sees her cross the Jordan by walking on the water
  - she dies that night; he finds her body the following year and buries it
- A Model of Repentance
  - like Saint Paul, Mary may be considered an “extreme case” of God’s mercy
    - Zosimas assumed she must always have been holy
    - Mary knows that the transformation in her soul is due to God’s grace
  - the fact that she was healed of many sins led to a great love for Christ
  - a reminder that we must never lose hope for anyone’s conversion and salvation

## Saint Moses the Ethiopian

- “Ethiopian”: a somewhat generic Greek/Latin term for black Africans (from the Greek *aithos*, “burnt”, and *ops*, “face”); thus, “Moses the Black”
- a servant to a government official in Nitria
  - dismissed for stealing from his master
  - turns to a life of crime, becoming the leader of 70 thieves
  - after attacking a shepherd, goes to the desert, perhaps to escape authorities
- comes to hermitages of Scetis and becomes a monk
  - first under Abba Isidore, who teaches him patience and perseverance
  - later a disciple of Abba Macarius: Moses is a spiritual “grandson” of St Antony
- deep repentance for sins and fierce battles against temptations lead him to
  - true humility
  - an unwillingness to judge any of his neighbors
  - a deep joy in God’s love and in having been forgiven by God
  - a genuine hospitality and love of neighbor
- dwells in the desert to the age of 75

- barbarians attack Scetis
  - he sends his disciples away, though 7 remain with him
  - dies a martyr's death
  - at his death he left behind 70 disciples
- the wisdom of Abba Moses
  - “My many sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the error of another.”
  - “The monk must die to his neighbor and never judge him in any way. . . . When someone is occupied with his own faults, he does not see those of his neighbor.”
  - “I was arguing with God, saying, ‘You brought me here, and now I have no water for your servants.’ That is why I was going in and out. I was going on at God until he sent us some water.”
  - “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”
  - “If a man's deeds are not in harmony with his prayer, he labors in vain. . . . We should no longer do those things against which we pray. For when a man gives up his own will, then God is reconciled with him and accepts his prayers.”
  - “Fasts and vigils make the soul humble. For it is written: ‘Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.’ So, if the soul gives itself all this hardship, God will have mercy on it.”
  - “Bear your own faults and pay no attention to anyone else, wondering if they are good or bad. . . . Do no harm to anyone, do not think anything bad in your heart towards anyone, do not scorn the man who does evil. . . . Do not rail against anyone, but rather say, ‘God knows each one.’ . . . Do not have hostile feelings toward anyone, and do not let dislike dominate your heart. Do not hate him who hates his neighbor.”
  - “This is what peace is: Encourage yourself with this thought, ‘Affliction lasts but a short time, while peace is forever, by the grace of God the Word.’”

